

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 8b, Hebrews 9:1-10:18: Christ our Atonement (Part 2)

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In the opening verses of chapter 10, the author returns to consider the cause of the inability of the first covenant sacrifices to perfect those who draw near. In this way, he establishes the need for the work of the priest after the order of Melchizedek afresh. For the law, holding a shadow of the good things that were about to come, and not the very likeness of those things, can never perfect those drawing nearby means of the same annual sacrifices that they offer perpetually.

Here, the author calls the law, in effect, a shadow of what was to come. He had previously applied this term only to the earthly copy of the heavenly tabernacle in chapter 8, verse 5, but now extends the term shadow to describe the nature of the whole cultic law. It lacks efficacy because it lacks real substance, vaguely pointing away and forward from itself to that ritual that possesses the necessary power to remove sins, namely, Jesus' offering of himself.

For many scholars, the word shadow automatically conjures up platonic views of the cosmos and of reality. You might be familiar with Plato's allegory of the cave in his Republic, where Socrates describes most people as facing away from the entrance of a cave, the source of light, looking at the wall in front of them, and seeing shadows passing before them, but never turning their heads toward the opening of the cave to see the real people that are moving by, casting those shadows against the wall. Our author, however, departs in some very important ways from platonic thinking because the author is committed to a temporal framework in which God intervenes in human history.

The law is the shadow of the real things that are still in the future, not things that already exist in the realm of mental concepts, as in Plato's philosophy. The law is the shadow of the good things that were about to come from the point of view of Moses and that now, from the point of view of the preacher, have indeed come in the high priesthood of Jesus. The annual repetition of the sacrifices prescribed by the Torah, and here the author is thinking chiefly of the annual Day of Atonement ritual, signals for the author their ineffectiveness.

He offers an argument from the contrary as proof of this. If these rituals were able to cleanse the conscience, would they not have ceased being offered on account of the worshipers being cleansed once and for all, no longer having sins on their conscience? But in these, there is an annual reminder of sins. The unstated assumption here is that cleansing the conscience should be a one-time act and that sins will not return to beset the conscience anew.

The author may have in mind here the two sides of the new covenant in Jeremiah's oracle. On the one hand, the removal of old sins that stood between the people of God, and on the other hand, the living out of what pleases God because God has planted God's requirements internally in the mind and in the heart, so as not to defile the conscience anew. According to our author, the endless sacrifices operated under the Levitical priesthood achieve a very different goal.

Rather than remove sins, he asserts that there is an annual reminder of sins in these. This is a claim that seems to be based on a generalization of a particular sacrifice in Numbers chapter 5, verse 15, the sacrifice that was performed to bring the sins of the suspected adulterous to remembrance, a sacrifice offered by a jealous husband to make his wife conscience-stricken and make her guilt come into the open. The author looks to this one sacrifice for bringing remembrance of sins and applies it as a general principle to the entire sacrificial system, including the Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement sacrifices.

Such a generalization of a specific law might strike us as very strange, but it wasn't unique to our author. Philo of Alexandria, for example, uses that same text, Numbers 5:15, as proof that the sacrifice of the person whose heart is not right with God does nothing but remind God of their sinfulness. The author of Hebrews has indeed presented an ideologically motivated interpretation of the Day of Atonement.

For its actual participants, it was no doubt more than just a reminder of sins. Leviticus 16 verse 30, for example, gives every indication that the ritual is supposed to work. We read there, on this day, atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you from all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord.

The author of Hebrews, however, might concede that the rites repair the relationship, but he argues successfully that they do not particularly improve the relationship. Still decisive in his mind is the strict limitation on access to God under the first covenant and its rites. Yom Kippur acted out and perpetuated the limited, graded access to God prescribed by the Torah.

It never served to let the people break through the barriers that separated them from God. In an ultimate sense, then, it never made the people truly clean before the Lord. To prove this radical negation of Yom Kippur's efficacy, the author adds the principle that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

That the author could make such a claim should strike us as quite surprising, especially in the light of Leviticus 16:30, or even more basic in the light of Leviticus 17, verse 11, where the voice of the Lord is heard to affirm the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives upon the altar, for as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. The author of Hebrews, however, stands more than a millennium away from such ritual prescriptions and has the

benefit of looking back behind him on the Jewish prophets' critique of animal sacrifices. In those writings, the prophets expressed their concern that sacrificial rituals should not be used merely as medicine against the just consequences of unmitigated oppression and injustice.

Prophets like Isaiah already elevated the value of obedience in the first place over sin offerings that followed failure. They also stress the importance of internalizing the positive values of love and mercy in one's dealings with one's fellow Israelites and the avoidance of injustice and exploitation. The author can also look back on the oracles of God, speaking about God's dissatisfaction with even his loathing and rejection of the performance of animal sacrifices without the accompanying dedication of heart and life.

Isaiah 1, verses 11 to 13, is typical of this prophetic strain. What to me is the abundance of your offerings, says the Lord. I am full of the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of lambs.

I do not want the blood of bulls and goats. Bringing offerings is useless. The author of Hebrews has, in fact, used the phrase the blood of bulls and goats from this Isaiah text twice during his exposition about the superior sacrifice of Jesus.

First in chapter 9, verse 13, and again here in chapter 10, verse 4. What was in the prophetic texts an attempt to safeguard the integrity of the sacrificial system becomes in Hebrews a declaration of the complete inefficacy of the system itself. Having established the need for a sacrifice that would go beyond what was possible within the Levitical priestly system, the author now seeks in scripture a warrant for his conviction that Jesus supplied that need. The author turns to Psalm 40, verses 6 to 8, as the principal proof for his radical claims about the ineffectiveness of the very animal sacrifices that God had legislated and also as the warrant for the voluntary offering a single human victim could achieve when those sacrifices could not.

And so, we read, therefore when he comes into the world, he says, you did not want sacrifices and offerings, but you prepared a body for me. You are not pleased with the whole burnt offerings and sin offerings. Then I said, behold I come, in the chapter of the book it is written concerning me, to do your will O God.

Saying higher up that sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sin offerings you have neither wanted nor take pleasure in which things are offered according to the law. Then he says behold, I come to do your will. He removes the first in order to make the second stand by which we will be sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.

When we compare the quotation of Psalm 40 as it is given in the text of Hebrews with a translation of Psalm 40 found, for example, in most English translations of the

Old Testament, we would notice some important differences. This is because, again, the English Old Testament in practically every bible is based on the Hebrew text, the Masoretic text, whereas the author of Hebrews is reading Psalm 40 in its Greek translation, commonly referred to as the Septuagint. In the Hebrew text of the Psalm, we would read, sacrifice and offering you do not desire but ears you have dug for me.

You have not required burnt offering and sin offering. Then I said see I come in the rule of the book it is written concerning me. I delight to do your will. O my God, your law is written in my heart.

The psalmist's confession ears you have dug for me suggests that obedience to the Torah, the provision of ears to hear and to heed God's commandments, is to replace the transgression of the Torah, which makes the animal sacrifices still regarded by the psalmist as effective necessary in the first place. But the Jews who translated the Hebrew Psalm into Greek rendered ears you have dug for me as a body you have prepared for me. This change might have been introduced as a more aesthetically pleasing image as the digging of ears could be considered too ugly or simply too anthropomorphic an image in its presentation of God's creative action.

The translator, however, would nevertheless have been communicating the same meaning as the Hebrew text. Obedience to the Torah, being given a body with which to perform God's covenant stipulations, pleases God, whereas transgression followed by atoning sacrifices will not please God, although it may still secure forgiveness. The author of Hebrews, however, finds a very different interpretation when he applies this psalm to the lips of Jesus.

An exegetical practice of his that we have already encountered throughout this sermon. At the same time, he is reading this in line with his principle that a more recent word of God can correct, clarify, or even nullify an older pronouncement. That is to say, God may indeed have instituted the animal sacrifices in Leviticus, but in the voice of the psalmist centuries later, this oracle from God declares God's lack of pleasure in those sacrifices entirely and God's desire for something else.

When the author of Hebrews introduces the quotation of this psalm with the phrase therefore when he, meaning the son of Jesus, therefore comes into the world, he subtly sets the hermeneutical context for interpreting the psalm passage. The preparation of a body is now heard as the son taking on the flesh and the blood shared by the many sisters and brothers. The word becoming flesh as it were in the incarnation.

After reciting the psalm text, the author works through it a second time, highlighting the contrast between God's rejection of sacrifices that are offered according to the law and God's implicit acceptance of another kind of sacrifice involving the willing

obedience of the son for whom God has prepared a body as a substitute for the former offerings the burnt offerings and animal sacrifices. Thus, in Psalm 40, our author finds an authoritative scriptural warrant upholding his claim that animal sacrifices achieve nothing significant for the divine-human relationship. Indeed, God has set these aside in favor of Jesus' offering.

As the author himself had written, he sets aside or takes away the first in order to establish the second. The meaning of doing God's will in the psalm is clarified in verse 10. By means of this will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.

The author recontextualizes three keywords of the psalm quote here, offering body and embedding them in his decisive interpretation of this psalm text. The psalm is transformed from a declaration of commitment to Torah observance as a better means of pleasing God into an oracle announcing the means by which God's will for the will be fulfilled by the self-sacrifice of Jesus' body prepared for him by God for this very purpose. Scripture thereby provides the warrant for the strange sacrifice that the early church believed Christ's death to be.

In chapter 10, verses 11 to 18, the author brings his central argument to its conclusion. He does this by drawing Psalm 110, verse 1, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet, a verse that has enjoyed prominence throughout this sermon in his discussion of Jesus' priestly work. In so doing, the author is able to confirm his assertions about the effectiveness of Jesus' once for all sacrifice in a surprising way.

And so, we read, and every priest stands daily ministering and offering frequently the same sacrifices that are never able to take away sin. But this one, having offered a single sacrifice on behalf of sins, sat down permanently at the right hand of God for the time that remains, waiting until his enemies are made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering, he has forever perfected those being sanctified.

The author is here leading out the implications of Psalm 110 verse 1, the sitting down of Jesus for Jesus' priesthood, which is the topic of Psalm 110 verse 4. Standing was known as the posture of serving in the tabernacle and the temple. Deuteronomy 10 verse 8 speaks of the tribe of Levi as those who are set apart, quote, to stand before God to serve. The Levites are described as those who, again quoting, stand to minister there before the Lord in Deuteronomy 18 verse 7. When the priest, after the order of Melchizedek, is invited to sit at God's right hand in Psalm 110 verse 1, the author infers the text to be saying something significant about Jesus' priesthood.

The psalm presents a priesthood that would not engage in repeated cultic activity, an activity that would require a priest to stand. Instead, psalm 110 verse 1 anticipates a completed priestly act after which the priestly incumbent in the line of Melchizedek

could sit down for the long interim between his ascension and the final subjugation of his enemies. By returning to that second component of Psalm 110, verse 1, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet, the author also returns to the eschatological chord that he struck in chapter 9, verses 26 to 28.

Here, however, he highlights the other side of Jesus appearing a second time. It will not just be for rewarding those who eagerly await him, as he said in 9 26 to 28, but also for the subjugation of those who oppose the son rather than have become his partners and friends. For those Christians among the addressees who remain committed, this provides welcome assurance that the God who vindicated Jesus' honor will also vindicate the honor of Jesus' clients against those who have viciously opposed both.

For those wavering in their commitment, however, who are pondering the advantages of withdrawing from open association with the name of Christ, these alternatives will help them to remain within the Christian group. The preacher will reinforce this in the exhortations that follow in the section that begins with Hebrews 10 verse 19. One may either enjoy the purification of the conscience, which allows unprecedented access to the very presence of God, or one may go to the opposite extreme and encounter the son as the enemy and God as the judge and agent of punishment.

The author has framed verse 14 of chapter 10 as the solution to the promise, sorry, the problem announced in verse 1 of chapter 10. Three shared terms or phrases mark verses 1 and 14 out as inclusion, verbal bookends, as it were, around this section. While the perpetually offered sacrifices prescribed by the Torah are unable to perfect those drawn near by God, Jesus has, by a single sacrifice, perfected forever the worshipers approaching God through him.

The three shared terms here are offering, perpetually, and perfect, and this signals to the hearers that the problem posed in verse 1 is now answered in and by the time of verse 14. The first paragraph of the exhortation following this lengthy exposition in chapter 10, verses 19 to 22, will urge the hearers to retain the advantages that their new and fuller cleansing by Christ has brought them. This exhortation also echoes the earlier exhortation in chapter 4, verses 14 to 16, such that, in essence, the entire central argument of the sermon about Jesus' priesthood has served to show why the exhortation previously given in chapter 4, verses 14 to 16 can be confidently acted upon by the hearers, and why the hearers can indeed be assured of their access to God's presence and God's timely help for their perseverance in their Christian pilgrimage to their better city and homeland.

The author concludes this central section with a second recitation of Jeremiah 31, this time just verses 33 and 34, rounding out his discourse. He had quoted all of

Jeremiah 31:31 through 34, in Hebrews 8, verses 7 to 13. Here, the reprise of some of those verses serves as a sort of scriptural QED for the author's exposition.

A declaration, look, I have proven what I have set out to prove, showing how Jeremiah's prophetic oracle was indeed fulfilled in Jesus' death and post-resurrection activity. No lesser authority than the Holy Spirit is brought in to bear witness to the truth of what the author has been expounding. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us, for after saying, this is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, the Lord says, setting my laws upon their hearts, I will write them even upon their minds, and their sins and their transgressions I will certainly remember no longer.

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer an offering for sins. The fact of the new covenant's inauguration, a premise basic to Christian culture and not likely to be disputed by the preacher's audience, means, according to the oracle in Jeremiah, the decisive forgiveness of sins. This is evidence, once again, for the truth of the claim the author made in Hebrews 10 verse 14.

The author calls attention to two components of the promise of the new covenant. Not only God's promise to remove the sins that stood as an obstacle between God and God's people but also God's promise to equip the people with an interior awareness of what pleases God in order that the people would be able to live obediently and in such a manner as pleased God. The author further exhorts the congregation to take hold of both benefits provided under the new covenant.

He calls them, in exhortations both before and after this central discourse, to seize the advantage of going boldly to the very throne of God, and he calls them throughout the sermon to live lives that God regards with approval. What he writes at the very conclusion here, where there is forgiveness of these, there is no more place for a sin offering, and he will take in two directions. Here, the statement is read positively as an affirmation of the decisive efficacy of Jesus' death on our behalf.

Just a few breaths later, however, in chapter 10, verses 26 to 31, the author will return to the fact that no sacrifice for sins remains as part of his most threatening warning not to depart from the one who has made this decisive and final sin offering on their behalf. Hebrews 9:1 to 10:18, the second half of the author's central discourse about the priesthood of Jesus, has advanced the author's rhetorical goals for this sermon in several important ways. First, it reinforces key convictions within the Christian community about Jesus, his death, and its aftermath.

The preacher presents these events as effecting the decisive atonement for sins and the decisive fitting of Christ's followers to enter into God's eternal presence, and he also establishes the significance of Jesus' death and ascension as the inauguration of the new covenant, the enactment of its promises. Second, in the author's

presentation of what is essentially an invisible heavenly ritual act, the author invites the hearers to engage imaginatively in what is happening or what has happened historically in the unseen realm after Jesus' ascension, his departure from the visible realm. Among other things, this will reinforce for the hearers the reality of that other realm, as well as the reality of activity beyond death.

These are particularly important as the author is intent on getting the hearers to live not just for this life but for the life of the age to come, and the author is intent on getting the hearers to continue to lay aside the goods of this life, of this material visible world, in favor of what they possess in that invisible heavenly sphere. The more he can engage them in thinking about that sphere as a reality, as a place where real action takes place, as in Jesus' entry there on their behalf and sitting down on God's right hand, the more he will free them from thinking of this world, this visible reality, as the only reality for which they should be concerned. Third, he sets forth the unparalleled and unprecedented advantages Jesus has gained for them and enjoyed by them on the basis of their attachment to Jesus.

This presentation of advantage becomes the foundation for the author's exhortations, both those that he had already launched in chapter four and the subsequent exhortations that will occupy the remainder of his sermon. These chapters continue to challenge us as well as we think about discipleship and ministry in our context. First, we cannot read the author's criticism of the graded access to God under the Levitical system without thinking critically about how we might be limiting access to God and creating new hierarchies within our Christian congregations.

While clergy serve very important purposes within the Church, there is always the danger that the distinction between laity and clergy will re-institute the kind of graded access to God that the author of Hebrews found to be a deep flaw of the Levitical system. Clergy could be seen as new mediators rather than merely as facilitators and equippers for the entire body of believers who together enact the priesthood with which God has vested them all equally. Clergy could also be seen as ministry professionals, those who are set apart to do the work of the Church rather than equippers of all the ministers of the Church who have been sanctified by Jesus' offering for their own priestly ministry of extending God's favor to others.

There's also a danger that the laity will not regard their lives as comparably sacred with that of the clergy and that they might not take up the responsibilities that their spiritual consecration by Christ lays upon them. The Sermon to the Hebrews will call believers to offer sacrifices of worship, witness, and acts of love and service in chapter 13. The preacher thus casts the daily activity of laity in the language of priestly activity.

It is therefore incumbent upon us in the Church, while we continue to honor the work of full-time ministry professionals and to honor what clergy bring to the congregation, not to re-institute the division, the caste system in effect, that the author of Hebrews sees Jesus to have overcome in his priestly work on behalf of the whole people of God. The removal of all barriers now to our access to God calls all of us to diligent ministry in prayer and in outreach, joining in the proper work of priests, announcing the reconciliation of God and human beings, and calling others into the new and intimate way of relating to God that Jesus has opened up for us all. Second, the author of Hebrews leaves us with an awareness of living between the priestly work that Jesus has accomplished on our behalf in his death, resurrection, and ascension and the work that Jesus is yet to do when he returns a second time, not to deal with sins, but to reward those who eagerly await him and subjugate his enemies.

Our task in this interim is to remain faithful to our reconciled divine patron and to remain committed to the people called by God's name, to show loyalty in the face of an unbelieving, sometimes mocking, sometimes even hostile society, and as the author puts it in Hebrews 9:28, to wait eagerly for Christ. This waiting means choosing our activities, setting our priorities, and shaping our ambitions in light of that day when Christ shall appear a second time. With our ambitions thus focused, as we pour ourselves into witness, worship, acts of love, and sharing, we find that we are indeed fulfilling the law written in our hearts and minds, living lives that are pleasing to God, and avoiding fresh defilements of the conscience.